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Air War:

How the 'Ants' Defy the Bombs

WASHINGTON — Every morning, seven days a week, the White House receives over the signature of Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird a detailed report on the bombing of North Vietnam in the preceding 24 hours.

Known in the Washington intelligence community as "Lairdgrams" and marked "Top Secret—Eyes Only," these reports come with color maps on which strikes by B-52 bombers are represented by red squares and hits by fighter-bombers by red dots. Since the United States began its massive bombings last April, these maps look as if North Vietnam was covered with a large blotchy rash. Last Sunday, for example, there were 320 strikes; on Monday, 300.

Aerial photography and pilots' reports, likewise forwarded to Washington, attest to the superb accuracy of the bombing what with laser beam, radar, television and computer guidance available to American pilots as they roar over North Vietnam—covering the country from the demilitarized zone in the south up to the restricted belt within 25 miles of the Chinese border in the north.

But in recent weeks the Nixon Administration has been discovering with growing discomfort and concern that the correlation between the technically perfect bombing and its real impact on Hanoi's battlefield capabilities in South Vietnam is considerably less than meets the eye on Mr. Laird's maps.

In fact, other top-secret reports reaching the White House—from the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Air Force—provide evidence that despite the relentless bombing of railways, highways, bridges and depots and the mining of North Vietnamese ports, the Communists not only have been able to keep their forces in South Vietnam adequately supplied, but also have managed to send down 20,000 fresh troops just in the last six weeks—for a grand total of 100,000.

According to these reports, made available by intelligence officials last week, the best current estimate is that about 5,000 tons of supplies—including weapons, munitions, fuel and lubricants, and food—enter South Vietnam daily. These supplies support Hanoi's present military effort as well as enabling it to prepare new offensives that now are expected late this month and in October while the diplomatic stalemate persists in Paris.

The massing of North Vietnamese troops in the rice-rich Mekong Delta region southwest of Saigon suggests to intelligence officers that the opening of a new major front in the war may be in the offing along with more heavy action in the northern provinces. Hanoi's forces in the delta region have increased 10-fold since last March in what for years had been South Vietnam's most pacified area.

The C.I.A. and the D.I.A. concur in the judgment that the Communists can sustain the fighting at its present rate for two more years regardless of the bombing. Conversely, the Air Force thinks that at least two more years of the air war are required to break Hanoi's military back—assuming, of course, that the South Vietnamese Army can hold its own.

Intelligence officials emphasize that the two-year estimate is not necessarily maximal but represents the outer limit of reasonable projections possible at this time. These officials also stress that the bombing is gradually "bleeding them white."

This state of affairs has faced Washington with three basic questions:

o *How do the North Vietnamese go about their build-up despite the bombing?*

Intelligence specialists report that the Communists largely neutralize the bombing with their "ant tactics"—the overwhelming use of manpower to transport equipment over bombed-out stretches of railway and highway and across the rivers where bridges are gone. Troops all over seem to be marching at night, evidently invisible to aircraft overhead.

Fuel is pumped through new underground pipelines running from China to Hanoi and thence south. The systematic measurement of munitions expended by the Communists and the constant discoveries of new arms caches indicate that they are not yet seriously hurting for ordnance.

The military here, however, claim that if it were not for the bombing, supplies would be moving into South Vietnam at twice the present volume.

o *Why are the Communists building up at this stage?*

Senior intelligence, military and political officials in Washington speculate that North Vietnam (like the United States) believes in fighting while talking. No serious political analysts believe that North Vietnam has the slightest intention of accepting President Nixon's offer of a cease-fire, subsequent elections in South Vietnam and a total United States military withdrawal. If anything, the most recent Hanoi and Vietcong pronouncements in Paris and elsewhere are more insistent than ever on a simultaneous political settlement, starting with the removal of South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu (to whom President Nixon is publicly committed) and the creation of a provisional coalition.

There are few illusions that the secret meetings between Henry A. Kissinger, Mr. Nixon's national security adviser, and Le Duc Tho, the Hanoi Politburo member, will result in a diplomatic breakthrough in the foreseeable future. For now, they serve as useful diplomatic and political window-dressing for both sides.

o *What can the United States do to change the situation?*

There is no obvious answer here. The military acknowledge that the United States bombings have already reached their peak in terms of air capability.

As seen from Washington, therefore, the outlook is for a continued contest of political will power and military might. And more red dots and squares on the "Lairdgram" maps.

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. . .and Bombing Fiasco

How purely military judgment can miscarry even from a strategic standpoint is all too sharply illustrated by the bombing of North Vietnam that was authorized.

During his first week in office in January 1969, President Nixon asked the eight key military and civilian agencies of the Government concerned with the Indochina war what could be achieved by mining Haiphong and other ports and resuming the bombing of North Vietnam, which had been halted three months earlier.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the American military command in Saigon replied that the effect on the war would be decisive if previous restrictions were removed on the bombing of overland transport from China. But the C.I.A. and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (O.S.D.) challenged the military estimates.

As summarized by the Kissinger staff in the then-secret National Security Study Memorandum No. 1 (N.S.S.M.-1) in February 1969, the C.I.A. and O.S.D. said that "the overland routes from China alone could provide North Vietnam with enough material to carry on, even with an unlimited bombing campaign."

Three years later, on May 8, 1972, President Nixon disregarded the C.I.A.-O.S.D. judgment, which was supported by an impressive array of facts, and took the advice of the military, who evidently argued that "smart bombs" and other new techniques would make even more certain the success they predicted in 1969.

For four months now, the ports have been closed by mines and a massive bombing campaign has been under way. Indications that the Communists' war effort was not being impeded have been countered with the assertion that several months would be required before the interdiction campaign began to pinch. Petroleum supplies, which came by Soviet tanker overseas and had to be pumped ashore, were said to be particularly vulnerable.

These predictions now have been exploded by two separate intelligence studies. The C.I.A. and the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency have both concluded that the blockade and bombing, after four months, have had relatively feeble results.

The Communists have built three four-inch petroleum pipelines—which are hard to hit and can be rapidly repaired—south from the Chinese border to the Hanoi area and another from Hanoi to the southern tip of North Vietnam and beyond, into the Ashau Valley of South Vietnam. Ant-like tactics of rapid repair of damaged railways and bridges have also kept adequate supplies of other kinds moving from China. Enough supplies have got through for new Communist offensives in the next six weeks—including one in the Mekong Delta south of Saigon—if Hanoi decides to launch them.

The mystery is why anything other than this should have been expected. As the N.S.S.M.-1 study pointed out, "almost four years of air war in North Vietnam have shown—as did the Korean war—that, although air strikes will destroy transport facilities, equipment and supplies, they cannot successfully interdict the [overland] flow of supplies because much of the damage can frequently be repaired within hours."

That these facts, known since 1969, were disregarded is bad enough. What would be even worse would be continuing illusions that the mining and bombing might force Hanoi to accept a negotiated defeat. A compromise political settlement, which involves a sharing or division of power in South Vietnam, is the one way to end a war that neither side can win on the battlefield.